

“First line supervisors, battle buddies, friends and loved ones are a Soldier’s first line of defense against the threat of suicide.”

General Peter W. Chiarelli

Photo illustration by Jason Kelly (Fires Bulletin). Original photo by SSG Justin Weaver (U.S. Army).

Saving Soldiers from suicide: Army seeks to stamp out stigma

By Kim Reischling
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The phone call devastated his world, crumbling to dust his hopes and dreams for the future.

Several days elapsed, days filled with the mind-numbing grief that follows the end of a once-loving marriage. He felt helpless; thousands of miles away, deployed to Iraq, there was little he could do. He somehow got through those days, unthinkingly making the motions because his mind was elsewhere.

To rid himself of the physical memories, he placed the items she had sent in a box, each gift, each letter summoning a memory that magnified his loss. The wedding ring was the last to go. As he twisted it off his finger, something snapped inside. What snapped? It’s hard to define.

Perhaps he was overwhelmed by the mistaken belief that his burdens had become insurmountable, that life was no longer worth living.

In that instant he made an irrevocable decision. Grabbing his rifle, Specialist Joe Sanders placed the muzzle against his throat and pulled the trigger.

More than 33,000 people in the United States committed suicide in 2006. That year, in fact, suicide was the 11th leading cause of death. For every one of those deaths, an estimated 12 to 25 people attempted suicide, according to the National Institute of Mental Health.

SUICIDE RATES ARE RISING, AND THAT HOLDS TRUE EVEN WITHIN THE ARMY. In 2008, 140 Soldiers in the active-duty Army took their own lives. That puts the 2008 active-duty suicide rate at 20.2 per 100,000 – the highest ever for the Army, according to Army reports.

Proactive stand. The Army is taking a proactive stance to combat suicide.

“It is clear to all of us that the increased suicide rate in our Army represents an unacceptable loss to the Army and the nation,” said Vice Chief of Staff of the Army General Peter W. Chiarelli, in a report dated April 19, 2009. That’s why

the Army Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program was developed, to raise “mental fitness” to the same level the Army considers physical fitness.

A high-velocity bullet entering the brain almost always causes massive, irreversible damage, but that wasn’t the case for Sanders. He survived his attempted suicide because his M-4 failed to fire.

Sanders said he immediately went into “Soldier mode. I had to know why my weapon malfunctioned, so I took it apart and discovered the firing pin was missing,” he said.

Sanders confronted the only other person who had access to the weapon: His roommate and battle buddy, Specialist Albert Godding. “I asked Godding if he knew where the firing pin was and he told me he had taken it out. Then he asked me, ‘How do you know I took it out?’”

With that question, a flood of emotions spilled from Sanders – grief and despair over his failed marriage; anger over what he perceived as a betrayal by Godding; shock at being alive when only moments ago he was facing death. Sobbing, Sanders confessed to his battle buddy that he had tried to take his own life. Godding immediately called for a medic.

Godding’s vigilance saved Sanders life.

“After the phone call, Joe grew distant,” Godding said. “He started talking about killing himself while on guard duty. He said it jokingly, and I really didn’t think he was serious. But it weighed on me. So while he was out one night, I took the firing pin out of his weapon as a precaution. I questioned myself about doing that, but I felt it was necessary,” Godding said.

Sanders received the intensive counseling and support he needed.

“There was no prejudice against me because of what I had done,” Sanders said. “And maybe I’m just lucky, but my chain of command was very helpful. There was no doubt that they were concerned about my welfare.”

Climate changed. It wasn’t just luck. The Army climate has changed. Open communication and positive encouragement by command at all levels is the key to stemming the rise in suicidal behaviors,

Chiarelli said.

“In my recent visits to the field, I’ve seen how the stigma related to seeking behavioral health treatment represents one of the greatest barriers to individuals accessing care and improving overall performance and well-being.”

PART OF HELPING SOLDIERS IS MAKING IT PERMISSIBLE FOR THEM TO HELP THEMSELVES, THE GENERAL SAID. That means changing the culture so Soldiers are not ashamed to seek out mental health care. Chiarelli said recent assessments in theater have shown more Soldiers are willing to seek out mental-health care without the concern that it is perceived as weakness or that it will affect their careers.

And Sanders’ career is going strong, said Command Sergeant Major Sheon Alderman, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division.

“This Soldier is motivated. I asked him if he was ready for the promotion board and he was. Next he attended the Soldier of the Month board and was neck to neck with the winner. Then he went to the Warrior’s Leader Course and he did well. We’re going to be pinning sergeant’s stripes on this Soldier very soon,” said Alderman.

Sanders hopes that by speaking out, he can help other Soldiers understand that they don’t have to be embarrassed or ashamed to get help.

“If I can help one Soldier out there, then telling my story publicly is well worth it. Getting help is the strong thing to do. It takes courage to speak out instead of hiding those emotions away,” he said.

Chiarelli said that “first line supervisors, battle buddies, friends and loved ones are a Soldier’s first line of defense against the threat of suicide.”

Sanders fervently agreed.

“I get to be here today. I get to someday become a great husband and a father. I get to lead Soldiers. I get to do what I love to do because of my battle buddy, because he saw the signs that something was wrong and acted on them.”

Editor’s note: This article was released on the Department of the Army’s website, Sept. 21, 2009. Since then, reports indicate the number of Soldier suicides in 2009 exceeded the total for 2008.